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# BULLETIN

OF

## THE PENNSYLVANIA MUSEUM

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### COPTIC TAPESTRIES

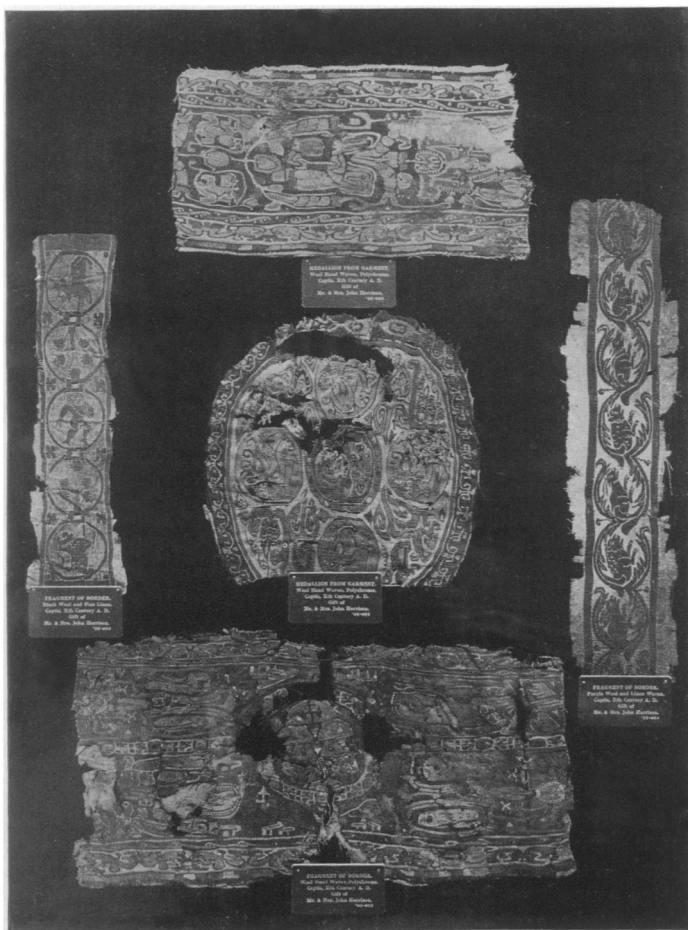
A small but extremely good collection of Coptic textiles forms a valuable part of the Museum's collection. The specimens come for the larger part from the Christian cemetery of Akhmim, upper Egypt, the ancient Panopolis of the Greeks, where in 1884 many burials of Roman and Byzantine times were opened, yielding an enormous number of garment and tapestry fragments and even entire garments. All range from the first or second to the eighth centuries of the Christian era. The Rev. Walter Lowrie some years ago read a paper before the Archæological Institute of America on "Greco Roman Textiles," <sup>(1)</sup> in which he called attention to the enormous importance of these garments in their bearing upon the study of ecclesiastical vestments. At first they were rather neglected by scholars, being regarded by them as representing merely a provincial industrial art. But Mr. Lowrie was among the first to realize "that they represent the cosmopolitan art and costume of the Roman Empire during this whole period. They have, therefore, the very greatest interest, whether for the technical study of the textile art among the Romans (materials of linen, cotton, wool and silk being found in the greatest abundance and variety or for the study of dress, both classical and Byzantine, and incidentally for the origin of ecclesiastical vestments), or finally, for the study of decorative art as exhibited in the tapestries and silk embroideries which decorate most of the garments."

It has been shown that designs on these textiles constitute the patterns seen on the conventional low-reliefs which were common from the fifth to the eleventh centuries, and which, during the greater part of this period, were almost the only exponents of the sculptor's art. A volume would not exhaust the suggestive questions brought up by these textiles. Their range covers approximately eight centuries—that is, from the second to the tenth of our era. Although the Christian Copts eventually ceased to mummify their dead, having now held out to them the hope of the resurrection of the body, they continued to dress them in garments often remarkable for the beauty of the embroidery or tapestries with which they are trimmed; such, for instance, as those in the Museum reproduced here, which are the gift of Mrs. John

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<sup>(1)</sup>A short abstract of this is given in the *Journal of the Archæological Institute of America*, VII. 76, January-March, 1903.

Harrison. It would seem that natron was sprinkled over the bodies in many cases, for some of the garments are covered with natron crystals. The dead appear to have been dressed in their best. The head was provided with a cap or band, and was at times resting on a pillow. The body wore a tunic; on



COPTIC TAPESTRIES  
Vth to Xth Century, A. D.

the feet were sandals or shoes. The head, breast, arms and fingers were laden with ornaments. Rank was indicated by inscribed wooden tesserae or tags, the man's tools, often buried with him, also indicating his profession. The body was entirely covered with linen and laid on a board and thus deposited in

the earth about five feet deep. There seems to have been no mound indicating the grave.

The span of time covered by the use of these textiles is variously estimated. The Rev. Walter Lowrie, above quoted, gives from the second to the eighth centuries as the period covered by them. According to Forrer,<sup>(2)</sup> the foundation of the Cemetery of Akhmim may be dated the second century, A. D., and the date for the decay of the best art is sought at the end of the seventh or during the eighth century. Gerspach, the Director of the National Manufactory at Gobelins,<sup>(3)</sup> says of a piece of cloth in the Gobelins Museum, the threads and the woof of which are of pure silk, that it must belong to a period subsequent to the eighth century, as silk does not appear in Egypt prior to that time. It may, then, be regarded as fairly agreed upon that the tapestries found at Akhmim, Upper Egypt, cover a period of some eight centuries or more, from the second to the tenth. Gerspach says:

"It is most probable that the Copts continued during some centuries to produce a manufacture in which they excelled. They doubtless worked at those thousands of pieces representing the great men of Islam, reproducing towns, landscapes, animals, in the possession of the Khalif Mostansser-Billah which were burned in Cairo in 1062 with the immense treasures accumulated in the repository of the Standards." Of the character, style, design and antiquity of Coptic textiles, this learned authority says:

"The style is more or less pure, but constantly evinces a great liberty of composition and of make. It is exempt from minutiae and subtleties, even when the artist's intention is not clear. When he does not cling to Roman decoration or to Oriental art, he is original. The work has a character of its own, a peculiar savor, whether the specimen is as fine as our laces or thick and coarse like the textiles of the inferior races. It, therefore, constitutes in a popular and intimate expression a special style that will perhaps soon be known as 'the Coptic style.' Indeed at the first glance one recognizes antiquity in the most simple pieces, which also are the most ancient. As a rule, those are of purple or brown color with light threads of ecru flax. The design is summary, clear, sober, well combined, harmonious, of great plastic frankness, in the style that eventually heraldic art will adopt. Naturally it is more feeble in the execution of the human figure than in the drawing of ornament, for the workman with his shuttle could not as easily trace his lines as could the ceramist with his brush. We must excuse the Coptic artisans, their successors in all times and in all countries having, like them, committed the same faults of drawing."

An entire garment of linen, decorated with purple inlays outlined with light threads of ecru flax, is in the collection of the Pennsylvania Museum.

The polychrome tapestries, such as three of those here illustrated, are usually later than the first described series, of which the Museum also possesses good examples, and do not appear earlier than the fourth century. But it is important to take note of the fact that certain primitive models were not dropped and that they are found in the modern textiles of the lower Danube

(2) Die Graber und Textilfunde vom Akhmim Panopolis, Strasburg, 1890.

(3) Les Tapisseries Coptes, p. 2, Paris, 1890.

region and of the East. Up till the fifth century, according to Gerspach, the design is still clear and legible. After this, an inferior series comes in. The lines are complicated and the forms become thick, and while the decoration still follows the old spirit, the figures are feeble. With the following centuries we fall into a relative decadence, although less profound than is that of mosaic in the seventh century. The human shape is twisted, shortened, the heads are animal-like; the animals are deformed and fantastic, provided with all kinds of tentacles. They are transformed into ornament. Flowers even are no longer purely ornamental or conventional—certain motives are incomprehensible. But the ornament, which survives better, presents always interesting combinations; and even amid their faults, the Copts continue to prove themselves decorators.

While silk, as we have already seen, was not known to Egypt in early times, and, according to Gerspach, dates there only from about the eighth century A. D., it was quite common in Greece and Rome at the end of the second century of our era. In the early centuries rich persons were wrapped in royal cloth made wholly of silk. When Pisentius, Bishop of Coptos, and his disciple, John, took up their abode in a tomb in the mountain of "Tchemi," that is, the Acropolis of Thebes, they found it filled with a number of mummies, the names of which were written on a parchment-roll which lay close by them. The monks took the mummies and piled them up; the outer coffins were very large and the coffins much decorated. The first mummy near the door was of great size, and his fingers and toes were bandaged separately. The cloths in which the man was wrapped were entirely of silk.<sup>(4)</sup> The monk who wrote the account described what he saw. The huge outer coffins denote a late period. The toes and fingers thus bandaged separately are a late Roman custom.

Although as early as 1646 Greaves, in his "Pyramidographica," had declared that mummy bandages, or as he called them "ribbands," were of linen, considerable difference of opinion and no little discussion has existed on the subject until Mr. Thomson, after some years of study in the course of which he employed Mr. Bauer, of Kew, to make microscopic examination of some four hundred specimens, finally in 1834 settled the question by publishing his results in "The Philosophical Magazine."<sup>(5)</sup> It was shown that, as stated by the Father of History (Herodotus, Book II.), mummy bandages are invariably of flax.<sup>(6)</sup> The Egyptian word for byssus was "Shens"; common words for linen were "mak, mennui, nu."<sup>(7)</sup> The material was an important manufacture in Egypt and an article of export. Wonderfully fine specimens of textiles have been found. At Thebes was found, it is said, a piece with one hundred and fifty-two threads in the warp and seventy-one in the woof, and Wilkinson

(4) Amélineau "Études sur le Christianisme en Egypte," p. 143.

(5) III<sup>d</sup> Series, Vol. V., No. 29, November, 1834. An account will be found in Budge's "Mummy," p. 190, University Press, Cambridge, 1893.

(6) "Fine cloth, however, was sometimes made of cotton. The alternate fibre of cotton under the microscope is a transparent tube without joints, flattened so that its inner surfaces are in contact along its axis. That of flax is a transparent tube joined like a cane, and not flattened nor spirally twisted."

(7) Budge, *loc. cit.*

(Ancient Egyptians, III., 165), mentions a specimen which had five hundred and forty threads in the warp and one hundred and ten in the woof.<sup>(8)</sup>

The entire subject was carefully gone over and studied toward the middle of the last century by Yates in "Textrium Antiquorum"<sup>(9)</sup> and a résumé of the conclusions then reached is given in Budge's "Mummy." "Apu"—*i. e.*, Akhmim—was the centre of the linen industry, but it is likely that other cities also possessed large linen factories.

There was a fashion in mummy wrapping, as in other things, the length and breadth of the strips varied according to period and taste. In early times after linen was used, the dead were enshrouded in sheets, then with the new Empire came the fashion of bandages, and as early as the reign of King Amenhotep III. texts were inscribed on the linen either in hieroglyphics or hieratic (cursive) characters, often adorned with vignettes from the Book of the Dead. After the XXVI Dynasty, that is, B. C. 670, only hieratic texts appear, with a vignette at the top of each column, and the bandages are often very coarse in texture. In Greek times, after B. C. 323, the outer bandages are decorated with gods, etc., in gaudy colors. Hundreds of yards of bandages were sometimes used. Some are ended with a fringe, and some have selvages. Their length varies from three feet to thirteen feet, and their width from two to four and a half.

The linen industry continued to be prosperously carried on in Egypt until the twelfth century of our era, but by this time the elaborate embroideries and tapestry borders which interest us at present had been evolved, had reached their highest artistic level and entered upon their decadent stage. S. Y. S.



## OLD DOOR-KNOCKERS

The literature of door-knockers is exceedingly meager and the standard encyclopedias are singularly silent on this subject. It has been generally supposed that the knockers used in this country were produced in England, but the majority of them are so different in character from those found on English houses that it is now thought that many of these distinctive patterns were made in the United States. In several places in Connecticut and other parts of New England, brass casting was carried on previous to the beginning of the nineteenth century. We know that brass candlesticks, andirons and other small objects were cast in this country and it is reasonable to suppose that door-knockers also, which at one time were in great demand in all sections of the Eastern States, were manufactured at the same establishments.

The door-knockers found on old American houses are usually simpler in form and decoration than those used in European countries, which latter

<sup>(8)</sup> Cf. Letters of de Fleury to Déveria "Les Étoffes Égyptiennes," Rev. Arch. XXI., pp. 271-221-1870.

<sup>(9)</sup> London, 1843. In this (p. 250) he had a map showing the divisions of the ancient world, in which sheep's wool, goat's hair, hemp, cotton, silk, beaver's wool, camel's wool, camel's hair and linen are found, and in this table the only district where linen was made in antiquity besides Egypt were "Colchis, Cinyps, and a district near the mouth of the Rhine."